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C O R R E C T E D C O P Y (CAPTIONS)

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SUBJECT: TAMIL NADU ELECTION: CLOSE CONTEST, BUT DMK-
ALLIANCE MORE CONFIDENT AS CAMPAIGNING CONCLUDES

REF: CHENNAI 0772 AND PREVIOUS

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11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Growing DMK confidence of success in Tamil Nadu's May 8 election was evident in our contacts with party insiders during the final days of the campaign. At the end of a long and intensive campaign battle, opinion polls and conversations with experts indicate a narrow lead for the DMK-led coalition that includes the Congress party. But the AIADMK is counting on the silent majority, the assured women supporters and the voters with no party affiliation, to see them through. Despite the advantages of a bigger coalition, DMK leader Karunanidhi's alleged nepotism, in particular, his grandnephew Union Telecom Minister Dayanithi Maran's alleged corrupt and high-handed business practices, has drawn much flak. On the whole, the contest remains close but even a slight advantage in overall vote total can lead to a large majority of seats when the results are announced on May 11. END SUMMARY.

DMK: OUR AIM IS TO THROW JAYALALITHAA OUT

12. (SBU) "We will form the government; that's for sure," DMK Treasurer Arcot Veerasamy told Post on May 15. Earlier, Sivaprakasam, one of the DMK's insider analysts who also runs the 24-hour control room in the party headquarters, briefed Post on the election using spreadsheets showing party and candidate strengths in each of the 234 constituencies: "We expect to win 190 seats. At the minimum, we will get 162," Sivaprakasam told Post with some confidence.

13. (SBU) Sivaprakasam believes the key to success lies in the varying strength of the two alliances. Sivaprakasam told Post that DMK ally, the Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK) party of the Vanniar caste is electorally more significant than Vaiko's MDMK party which left the DMK-led coalition to join with Jayalalithaa's AIADMK coalition. This is because MDMK voters are scattered throughout the state while the PMK is concentrated in the northern districts where they can swing the results in contests for individual seats. The leftist parties, CPI(M) and CPI, are very strong in a few constituencies, almost assuring that they will bring some winning seats to the DMK-led

coalition. And the Congress party by itself normally wins over 10 percent of the vote in Tamil Nadu. Additionally, according to Sivaprakasam, 90 percent of Muslims and Christians in the state will vote for the DMK coalition. Sivaprakasam said removing Jayalalithaa from power is the sole objective of DMK leader M. Karunanidhi and to accomplish that objective, Karunanidhi went out of his way to keep the grand coalition intact. He agreed to have his DMK party contest doubtful seats and gave away assured seats for his allies to contest, Sivaprakasam told Post. He settled for a very low 130 seats for the DMK to contest, leaving all the rest to the allies. To achieve the objective of unseating Jayalalithaa, "mentally we are prepared for a coalition government in Tamil Nadu," he said.

AIADMK: WE CAN'T MATCH THEIR MONEY, MEN, MEDIA POWER

14. (SBU) Former Home Secretary of Tamil Nadu and now an AIADMK Member of Parliament, Malaisamy (protect), admitted: "It is a tough fight. Although we are the ruling party in Tamil Nadu, we are no match for the money, men, and media power the other side is bringing into the campaign."

15. (SBU) According to Malaisamy, the AIADMK strategy banked on the 25-30 percent "neutral" (with no party affiliation) voters. "The original thinking was that we might win 70-80 percent of the neutral voters which would defeat the strength of the six party alliance of the Opposition. Now we are hoping for at least 50 percent of the neutral voters to at least match them". Malaisamy believes the DMK coalition has the additional advantage of having many leaders to campaign. "Karunanithi's family alone has three leaders; then there are five other party leaders, 13

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Union ministers, and leaders from the Center. We have only Madam (Jayalalithaa) and Vaiko to campaign." Malaisamy believes the AIADMK enjoys a lead in the southern and western districts and, if the alliance can manage to get at least 50 percent of the seats in the northern and Chennai areas, "ultimately we may have the edge." He said the party banks heavily on the women voters to achieve this.

RECENT OPINION POLLS FEED DMK OPTIMISM

16. (SBU) The latest opinion polls suggest a growing trend toward the DMK alliance. The Week/C-Voter poll, surveying 3053 respondents in 117 constituencies from April 10-20, projected a 3 percent lead in vote share for the DMK coalition (45 percent over the AIADMK's 42 percent). In terms of seats this translates into 130-138 seats for the former and 87-95 for AIADMK. The second phase of the pre-poll survey by the School of Media Studies, Loyola College, projected 45.1 percent votes for the DMK alliance and 39.5 percent for the AIADMK. According to this survey, the DMK alliance could pick up 134 seats.

17. (SBU) In the last round of Post's canvassing of opinions, a majority of the bank officers, trade unionists, firemen, lawyers, former politicians and journalists we spoke with in different parts of Tamil Nadu, indicate the same trend. P.S. Joseph of India Today, who undertook a tour of the interior parts of northern Tamil Nadu along with journalist colleagues, also returned with the same finding. Nonetheless, there were dissenters, who claimed that silent women

voters would hold the key to a surprise victory for Jayalalithaa and the AIADMK coalition.

KARUNANIDHI'S FAMILY RULE, A TARGET OF ATTACK

¶7. (SBU) Union Telecom Minister and Karunanidhi's grand-nephew, the U.S.-educated Dayanithi Maran, has drawn much flak from the opposition, particularly the fiery campaigner Vaiko. An Indian Express story alleging Maran's arm-twisting tactics on the Tatas obviously did much damage to the DMK. More than Karunanidhi's unpopular son Stalin, Maran has emerged as a liability to the coalition. However, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, who made a listless campaign speech at Chennai on May 4, chose to ignore the allegations and showered praises on his young cabinet colleague. Indian Express Correspondent Arun believes that the critical reports about Maran might not have impacted the villagers, who would not have understood the details but only gotten a vague sense that Karunanidhi is helping his family - not necessarily a bad thing in the eyes of many Tamils.

PONDICHERRY: CONGRESS THE LEADING PARTNER

¶8. (SBU) Pondicherry, a Tamil speaking former French enclave, now a Union Territory of India (not a full-fledged state, but one in which the Union Government has more administrative powers), located south of Chennai, will also complete the election to its 30-seat assembly on May 8. In Pondicherry, the Congress leads the coalition with the DMK, PMK and others as junior partners. On the opposition side, the AIADMK has an additional ally, a local faction of the Congress party.

¶9. (SBU) Chief Minister Rangasamy, a low-profile Congressman who usually tours his districts on a motor-bike, is popular among poor voters, although some businesses consider him not sufficiently dynamic. Attaching importance to a small "state" where Congress has chances of remaining in power, Congress President Sonia Gandhi campaigned in Pondicherry on April 25, hoping her strong support to Rangasamy would help limit the damage caused by ambitious dissidents within the party.

SRI LANKAN VIOLENCE NOT AN ISSUE IN TAMIL NADU ELECTION

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¶10. (SBU) The recent escalation in violence in Sri Lanka has not been a campaign issue in Tamil Nadu. Neither coalition feels they have anything to gain by introducing the subject which is not uppermost in the minds of most Tamil Nadu residents. Additionally, each coalition may have some internal disagreement among coalition partners on the issue of Sri Lankan Tamils. For example, Vaiko, now part of the AIADMK coalition, has long been thought to have connections to the LTTE and was once jailed by current coalition partner Jayalalithaa for expressing support for the group. On the DMK side, the PMK party also has been thought to have connections with the LTTE while the DMK distanced itself from the group after the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi.

WHAT'S IN THE MIND OF THE SILENT VOTER?

¶11. (SBU) COMMENT: As Union Finance Minister Chidambaram observed, the DMK manifesto has emerged as the real star of the Tamil Nadu election campaign. Jayalalithaa's desperation seems evident in her attempts to match the wild promises in the manifesto. In a last minute move she has now promised to give four grams of gold to every poor girl getting married. The silent voters who figure in the AIADMK's dreams remain the imponderable, whose opinion will be heard only after the counting of votes on May 11. If one goes by the levels of confidence on both sides, though, the DMK will definitely be the winner. END COMMENT.

¶12. (SBU) Post will report on the outcome of the election and its implications for U.S. interests after results are announced on May 11.

HOPPER